The Syntax and Semantics of the Specificational Copular Clauses in English and Bangla: A Comparative Study

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By

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Abstract

This thesis entitled “The Syntax and Semantics of the Specificational Copular Clauses in English and Bangla: A Comparative Study," conducts a comparative analysis of the syntax and semantics of specificational copular clauses in Bangla and English, advancing the understanding of copular constructions in typologically distinct languages. Bangla, an Indo-Aryan SOV language features a complex copula system with overt forms (*ach-*, *hO-* , *thak-*) and null copula, contrasting with English’s SVO structure and obligatory copula (*be*). Employing a qualitative methodology on the basis of natural language data, it illuminates the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic of specificational copular clauses, advancing Bangla linguistics and global theory.

Firstly, the thesis introduces the copula’s historical and philosophical foundations, from Aristotle to modern linguistics, proposing a nuanced redefinition of copula that accounts for its syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic roles across languages. It compares English’s single copula (*be*) with Bangla’s four copulas, reclassifying *hocche* and *holo* as copula-like emphatic particles (CLEPs) based on their syntactic and pragmatic features. The study clarifies the syntactic position of the copulas to be always clause-final, as it never occurs clause-medially. It also establishes a four-way taxonomy of Bangla copular clauses - predicational, specificational, identificational, and equative - highlighting Bangla’s null-copula flexibility. Next, the study delves into the syntactic and semantic specificity of specificational clauses, arguing that Bangla’s CLEP usage and predicate inversion contrast with English’s prosodic strategies, challenging different hypotheses like the linker and dummy models. Bangla’s CLEPs and other emphatic particles (*-i, to*) distinguish specificational clauses, rejecting oversimplified models (Lakshmi Bai, 1986). Syntactically, specificational clauses’ non-referential subjects (DP_1 <e,t>) and focused predicates (DP_2 <e>) behave symmetrically as it needs emphatic particles to break the

symmetry. Pragmatically, specificational clauses encode presupposed variables and exhaustive focus, marked by CLEPs and stress in Bangla. Moreover, it examines the information structure of specificational clauses, revealing Bangla's topic-focus alignment via CLEPs versus English's intonation-based focus. The similarity between pseudoclefts and specificational copular clauses in Bangla is empirically highlighted. Finally, it synthesizes findings, redefining the copula as a language-specific element shaped by pragmatic and typological factors, and proposes future research avenues, including corpus studies and cross-linguistic comparisons.

Chapter I has investigated the complexity of the concept of copula diachronically and cross-linguistically to highlight the diversity of its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic functions, contrary to any universalist assumptions. In traditional Indo-European languages such as Greek, Latin and English, overt copulas *('esti,' 'est, ' 'is'*) are obligatory as a linker for predication encoding tense or agreement. On the other hand, in Tagalog, Russian, and Arabic zero-copula constructions are prevalent in present tense.

The Bangla copula system exemplifies this complexity with its coexistence of null-copula constructions in present indicative and overt copulas marking formality or other tenses. This complexity challenges the notion of mandatory copula requirement reflecting the intricate syntactic and pragmatic dynamics of the language. This diversity of the copula's language-specific nature and context-dependent behaviour makes the attempt of defining the copula complicated.

In order to address this complexity, an attempt has been made to synthesize the philosophical, logical, and linguistic perspectives – from Aristotle's ontological views to modern typological research and also theoretical studies – and propose a rationale for a balanced definitions of the copula, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding its nature and function:

> A copula is a language-specific linguistic element that can facilitate predication by linking a subject to non-verbal predicate(s), verbalize them with grammatical features like tense, agreement, or aspect, assert propositional truth claim, and with its presence or absence, contribute semantically, determined by context-bound pragmatic and discourse factors.

This definition attempts to capture the copula's multifaceted nature, draws attention to its syntactic role, semantic nuances, and pragmatic modulation, and also acknowledges its cross-linguistic diversity.

Chapter II examines the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties of Bangla copulas, contrasting them with English. Bangla, an SOV language, employs four copulas: *ach-* ('to be present/exist'), *thak-* ('to remain/stay'), *hO-* ('to be/become'), and the null copula, each with distinct roles. *Ach-* marks existential presence, optional in predicative locatives with definite DPs, as in *"boi-Ta Tebil-e (ach-e)"* ('The book is on the table'). *Thak-* denotes permanent existence or habits, substituting for *ach-* in future and conditional clauses. *hO-* expresses being or becoming, overt in non-present tenses or generics. The null copula, prevalent in present-tense predicative and equative clauses, surfaces as *hO-* or *ach-* in negation, with *nO-* and *nei* as respective negative markers. The chapter has critically revisited the grammatical status of '*hocche*' and '*holo*' in Bangla language and argued against its traditional classification of a type of copula by analysing its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic feature and proposed an alternative term CLEP (Copula-like Emphatic Particle) to classify them which occupies a hybrid identity. They have morphological similarity to the copula '*hO-'* in aspectual markings and agreement properties, but its rigid clause-medial representation, resistance to other standard verbal operations (negation, interrogation, embedding) and arbitrary present-indefinite interpretation associate them to other emphatic particles of the language compared to canonical copulas. In contrast,

CLEPs do not perform the primary copular function of syntactically and semantically linking the subject and the predicate. They, like other emphatic particles, mark specificity/definiteness and prominence in discourse, without providing truth-conditional meaning, particularly in equative and specificational clauses. Diachronic evidence suggests their post-19th-century emergence, and cross-linguistic parallels with Oriya and Asamiya highlight a regional phenomenon. Drawing on Freeze's (1992) framework, the chapter analyzes predicate locatives and existentials, noting Bangla's flexible word order and copula omission. Pragmatically, CLEPs act as illocutionary modifiers, marking new information.

This chapter establishes Bangla's copular system as distinct from English's rigid SVO structure, highlighting its flexibility in copula omission and word order. By reclassifying *holo* and *hocche* as CLEPs, it resolves their syntactic peculiarities, aligning them with emphatic particles like *-i* and *to*. The findings underscore Bangla's non-verbal strategies in equative and specificational clauses, using classifiers and other emphatic particles to break DP symmetry. Comparative insights from related languages and diachronic analysis enrich typological discussions, while pragmatic analysis of CLEPs advances understanding of discourse functions. This analysis is of an entirely novel kind, rejecting other nomenclatures like Ferguson's 'Pro-copula', Dasgupta's 'Positive Polarity Copula' or Dey's 'Quirky Copula' as we intend to show that CLEPs do not hold any verbal properties, but belong to invariant particles, which have been syntactically constrained. The study calls for further corpus-based research on spoken Bangla and cross-linguistic investigations into Eastern Indo-Aryan languages, contributing to syntactic theory, language teaching, translation, and computational linguistics by illuminating Bangla's unique copular constructions.

Chapter III establishes a taxonomic framework for copular clauses, providing a critical foundation for the comparative analysis of specificational copular clauses in Bangla and English, the central focus of this thesis. By synthesizing seminal works from Higgins (1979), Declerck (1988), Mikkelsen (2005), and Den Dikken (2006), the chapter proposes a four-way classification of copular clauses - predicational, specificational, identificational, and equative - tailored to the syntactic and semantic properties of Bangla and English. This taxonomy serves as a theoretical scaffold, highlighting language-specific constraints and cross-linguistic patterns.

The chapter reveals that Bangla, a head-final SOV language, exhibits flexibility in copula omission in present-tense predicational clauses (e.g., *Ornob ek-jon Shikkhok*, 'Arnab is a teacher'), contrasting with English's obligatory copula (e.g., *John is a teacher*). Specificational clauses in Bangla often require a copula-like element (CLEP) or emphatic particles (e.g., *mukul holo klas-er sObtheke buddhiman chele*, 'Mukul is the best student in the class'), underscoring their distinct syntactic behaviour compared to predicational clauses. In English, specificational clauses involve predicate inversion, as noted by Moro (1997), aligning with their variable-specifying function.

The analysis rejects proposals to unify specificational and equative clauses (Heycock & Kroch, 1999), emphasizing Bangla's unique equative structures, where emphatic particles or CLEPs signal symmetry (e.g., *Shuktara-i holo sondhatara*, 'The Morning Star is the Evening Star'). Identificational clauses are distinguished by their asymmetric, deictic nature, resisting reversibility in Bangla unless contextually deictic. Partee's type-theoretic framework further clarifies these distinctions, showing specificational clauses' non-referential DP_1 (<e,t>) versus referential DP_2 in equative and predicational clauses.

This chapter's findings lay the groundwork for Chapter IV's in-depth exploration of specificational clauses' grammatical features. By identifying syntactic and semantic

contrasts between Bangla and English, it advances the thesis's comparative agenda. Limitations, such as the need for larger Bangla corpora, suggest avenues for future research, including relativization and topicalization across South Asian languages. Chapter III's rigorous classification thus not only supports the thesis's objectives but also enriches cross-linguistic studies of copular constructions.

Chapter IV significantly enriches the thesis's comparative analysis by delving into the syntax and semantics of specificational copular clauses in Bangla and English, building on the taxonomic and theoretical foundations of Chapters I–III. It establishes specificational clauses as a distinct category in Bangla, contrasting them with predicational, identificational, and equative clauses, and comparing their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties with English. Specificational clauses, as per Akmajian (1979), specify a value for a presupposed variable, e.g., *"dOl-er sOb theke lOmba khElowaR holo rohim"* ('Rahim is the tallest player of the team'), with the post-copular DP_2 bearing contrastive and exhaustive focus. Predicational clauses, like *"Omit Ek-jon skul ShikkhOk"* ('Amit is a school teacher'), ascribe non-referential properties to a referential subject, while identificational clauses, e.g., *"oi chele-ti am-ad-er oddhokkho-r bhaipo"* ('That boy is our principal's nephew'), identify entities via deictic or descriptive DPs. Equative clauses, such as *"netaji-i (to) holen subhascOndro"* ('Netaji is Subhaschandra'), assert identity with referential DPs, marked by emphatic particles or CLEPs. Bangla's syntactic flexibility, including zero-copula use in predicational clauses and obligatory CLEPs or other emphatic particles in specificational ones, contrasts with English's rigid copula requirement. Specificational clauses align with question-answer pairs, preserving presuppositions under negation, unlike predicational clauses' sentential negation. The analysis, grounded in Higgins (1979) and Declerck (1988), highlights Bangla's pragmatic focus marking via prosody and emphatic particles, distinguishing it from English. The specificational copular clauses' similarity to question-answer pairs and list-like

enumeration (Higgins, 1979) further distinguishes it, with Bangla's CLEPs enhancing their exhaustive and exclusive readings.

By comparing Bangla with English and drawing on theoretical frameworks (Mikkelsen, 2005; Partee, 1987), the chapter challenges universalist assumptions, such as equating specificational clauses with equatives or identificational ones. Bangla's non-reversible predicational clauses and the referentiality of DPs in specificational clauses reinforce their syntactic and semantic distinctness. The analysis of negation, conjunction, and information structure (presupposition vs. focus) further solidifies these distinctions, with Bangla's CLEPs playing a critical role in maintaining presuppositional integrity. The findings lay the groundwork for Chapter V's focus on information structure of specificational copular clauses, comparing them with clefts and pseudo-clefts, while noting the need for broader discourse analysis and larger corpora to explore pragmatic variations and cross-linguistic generalizability, contributing to syntactic and pragmatic theory.

Chapter V examines the critical role of information structure - specifically the dynamics of topic, focus, and given-new partitioning - in governing the syntax and semantics of specificational copular clauses in Bangla. Drawing on cross-linguistic frameworks (Lambrecht 1994; Mikkelsen 2005; Hartmann 2016), it demonstrates that these clauses inherently encode a variable-value relationship: the pre-copular DP (DP_1) functions as a presupposed variable (semantic type <e,t>), representing given information, while the post-copular DP (DP_2) serves as an exhaustive focus (semantic type <e>), supplying new information that uniquely instantiates the variable. Empirical evidence confirms focus as an intrinsic property of DP_2, marked through prosodic prominence (e.g., nuclear stress in "*sei hottyakari hocche akaSh"* ["That murderer is AKASH"]), syntactic restrictions (DP_2 exclusively answers wh-questions like "*ke sei hottyakari?"* ["Who is the murderer?"], and alone associates with focus-sensitive operators like '*kebalmatra'*

["only"]), and presuppositional invariance (DP_1's existential commitment persists under negation, as in *"dOl-er sOb theke lOmba khElowaR ki rohim nOy?"* ["Isn't Rahim the tallest player?"]). Bangla grammaticalizes this focus through language-specific strategies: the CLEP (*holo/hocche*) or any other emphatic particle is obligatory in specificational clauses, anchoring exhaustive focus ("*dOl-er sOb theke lOmba khElowaR holo rohim*"), while emphatic particles *('-i', 'to', 'naki'*) modulate focus strength (e.g., "*sei hottyakari - i hocche akaSh"* ("That murderer itself is AKASH")). These properties align specificational clauses with cleft constructions - it-clefts ("*se holo rohim je..."* ("It is Rahim who...")) and pseudoclefts *("je boi rohim kin-echh-e se-Ta ek-Ti uponnas*" ("What Rahim bought is a novel")) - which share the same variable-value architecture. Cross-linguistically, Bangla diverges from English by leveraging syntactic flexibility (scrambling, null copulas) and morphosyntactic focus-marking (CLEPs, other emphatic particles) alongside prosody, contrasting with Russian's word-order-driven focus (Geist 2007) and Arabic's prosodic adjacency (Benmamoun 2000). This study addresses critical gaps in South Asian language research by demonstrating Bangla's CLEP-driven focus licensing, exposing cleft/specificational parallels, and providing a typological framework. Finally, Bangla specificational clauses reveal how language-particular strategies (use of CLEPs, emphatic particles) universally encode exhaustive focus on DP_2, advancing our understanding of the syntax-pragmatics interface in copular systems.

The chapter establishes focus as an inherent property of Bangla specificational clauses, distinguishing them from predicational clauses where the subject is topical and focus is non-exhaustive. Bangla's syntactic flexibility, including word order scrambling and CLEP usage, underscores its unique focus-marking mechanisms. The findings advance the thesis's comparative objectives by elucidating Bangla's copula system and its interaction with information structure, bridging universal and language-specific perspectives. The chapter highlights the need for further research into Bangla's prosodic patterns and corpus-

based validation to explore syntactic constraints and typological implications, contributing a nuanced understanding of specificational copular clauses in a South Asian linguistic context.

Chapter VI is the conclusion chapter which synthesizes the thesis's findings, comparing specificational copular clauses in Bangla, an SOV Indo-Aryan language, and English, an SVO Germanic language. Using qualitative analysis of natural language data, it identifies four Bangla copulas (*ach-*, *thak-*, *hO-*, null) and reclassifies *hocche* and *holo* as Copula-like Emphatic Particles (CLEPs). Refining Higgins's (1979) typology, the study categorizes Bangla's copular clauses as predicational, specificational, equative, and identificational. Bangla's CLEPs and stress contrast with English's intonation, highlighting pragmatic differences. The chapter critiques linker, dummy, and predicator hypotheses, using cross-linguistic evidence from Mandarin, Turkish, and Arabic to challenge universalist assumptions. Pustet's (2005) syntactic definition is refined to include pragmatic roles, proposing the copula as a language-specific element facilitating predication, verbalization, truth claims, and discourse modulation.

This concluding chapter establishes Bangla's copular system as morpho-syntactically complex, filling gaps in South Asian linguistics and challenging Eurocentric biases. The reclassification of CLEPs and the proposed copula definition enhance typological and theoretical frameworks. Practical implications include improved language teaching, translation, and computational linguistics for Bangla. Future research directions - corpus studies, psycholinguistic experiments, prosodic analysis, and cross-linguistic comparisons - promise to deepen understanding of Bangla's copular constructions and their universal implications, advancing linguistic theory and application.

extensions would connect linguistics with cognitive science, broadening the study's impact and contributing to our understanding of human language.

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